The Metropol Drama

I.

The things we call art can, at their best, provide a way to peek a sideways glance at the impulses and desires behind someone else's experience. In this relating to others—be they friends or family, or the citizens of a different time and place—facts only take us part way in our knowing one another and at worst bring about an abridged way of thinking about others that can end in savagery. *The Metropol Drama* presents an atmosphere that sees people as possessing more than solely the logos of living. The stakes can be much higher and much more lovely.

The space you are in, dear viewer, provides a way of looking at an aesthetic, economic, and emotional history that is rooted in the contradictions of interaction which have produced peoples and states of being that are smudged and complex, hybrid and tragic. Having gone by many names, today we call this social and economic amalgam cosmopolitanism. The term can best be thought of as a kind of shorthand for a sensibility where a fluid exchange of capital, ideas, and people has provided fertile ground for new regimes in the ways one can feel, live, and be made vulnerable. It is in these frictions and interactions where the energy is, like the flint and the steel.

Cosmopolitanism's fertility would be impossible without the attendant mercantilist impulse that has provided its medium of exchange. From the beginning, capitalism has been by design and nature expansionist. Large markets and the requisite web of relations and infrastructure needed to support them are kept afloat by growth and resource consumption. The metabolism of the markets bound people and places together in new ways, dictated by inputs and outputs of huge systems of acquisition, production, distribution, and consumption. Buyers and sellers. Running under the banners of classical liberalism and then neoliberalism as we understand it today, global capital went abroad as maturing markets sapped profit and growth. In turn, the explosion of an expansive material culture that formed upon this skin of economic liberalism has provided an undergirding of our psychic and emotional life explicitly and politically but also and importantly, implicitly and at the level of the symbol. An important distinction and a trigger warning: that same hybridity, fertility, and interaction made possible by new forms of economics and the manipulation of money and which has been looked at by some as an engine of prosperity, progress, and high moral purpose has, for those on the other side of the hard lines that have been drawn, produced a system of interaction that has caused much grief, privation, and death.

I posit these ideas not as progressive or reactionary in their politics but to call attention to the fact that they form a structure we sit within. But among the many myths told of capitalism, its ability to connect dissimilar peoples is held up as a shining example of humankind's success. This is part of a universalizing narrative of progress that modernism has bestowed. In this story, an audacious perfection in the technocratic management of social relations is always just around the bend, often clad in transparent glass. Within this ideal is a society free from the negative externalities resulting from man's capacity for greed and willingness to inflict pain on others.

As we see in this exhibition, speaking to how we collectively form ideas about what is communal, what is sold, and what is taken has been a task assigned to art since way back, not just in modern times, and not just in the European context. But for me, this came alive when my uncle gave me a collection of short stories by Honoré de Balzac. (I think he may have given me the book unintentionally along with a copy of Woody Allen's *Side Effects*.) Balzac was one of Marx's favorite writers. Writing from his perch between the bohemian and the bureaucratic, he was a firsthand witness to the explosion of a set of new ideas about nation, money, and propriety in Restoration France. On the way, he more or less invented social realism in literature. What I love in his writing (and maybe this is also where Marx appreciated him) is his sympathetic but incisive portrayal of the social type. In his narratives, we see social subjects put into a web of relations based on their societal position as much as their individual attributes. The comedy of manners needed to survive in the burgeoning capitalist environment was his real subject. His protagonists walk in a world defined by power delivered by the bureaucracy as much as by either sentiment or God.

Much later, at the Wexner Center for the Arts bookstore in Columbus, Ohio, I bought Balzac's *The Physiology of the Employee*. In short, the book was a litany of how men (and they were all men) learned to read one another's class position attributes and power within the newly forming bureaucracies of Restoration France. As I write this now, I realize this may have been part of the origin story for *The Metropol Drama*.

These questions of mobility, capital, and sensibility all ask the same thing: what is the cosmopolitan subject? What makes a community in the context of an overwhelming multiplicity of experiences and statuses? Is the cosmopolitan subject only the historical (and exhausted cliché) flâneur at the top of the middle class? What of the person living far away from the metropole, sending (for profit or by compulsion) their resources to be processed on distant shores? Are they not also part of the same circle of

engagement? Also exposed to the same cultural whirlwind? My motivation in making this exhibition is to think about the ways in which both of these people live in the cosmopolitan world. Dependent on and influenced by one another, both are subjected to the same effects that our empires bring about.

As a way of setting the stage that our characters walk on, it would be useful to talk about character type. The cosmopolitan character is in short, a polyglot—hungry with distinctly diverse desires, aspirational politics, and a promiscuous set of interests and allowances. By necessity comfortable with the frictions within their community and the attendant smudged lines within themselves. A well-worn indictment of and anxiety about cosmopolitanism is that it is without distinction, rootless. Yet the webs of interaction and meaning-making that produce the sensibility we are discussing are anything but rootless. The cosmopolitan subject is a citizen of a particular time and place. The home we make, whether in a center or on the periphery, inevitably sits within a specific matrix of interaction both economic and cultural which gives shape to a mashup of ideas (however incoherent or promiscuous) about life and love, intellectual pursuits and money.

I hope this exhibition speaks well to the idea that when homeplace and mobility interact they produce new sets of social and economic conditions, power dynamics and, most importantly for this project, peoples. The contradictions and fissions of the metropole are the source material for much of the production of avant-garde culture and novel ways of living that have added to the human experience economically, politically, and technologically as well as in our understanding of the subjective. This in turn has affected the things we call art. Art has an important role in social life in such a multivalent space: a tool to negotiate difference and help build new materials of understanding and compassion—or failing that, at least it sharpens the blade of disagreement.

II.

It can be tender to talk about collective meaning in this day and age. In our darker moments, one may feel that we are living in a period that is "post-communal," although there is likely a better term than that. Looking upon a landscape of resource depletion, climate change, and the multiple, real, fundamental challenges to our systems of governance across the globe, one could conclude that our capacities for the commons have been exhausted. In this environment, it can be tempting to lull ourselves into a narcotic and nostalgic romanticism about our collective ability to "work things out" that cosmopolitanism is often mistakenly characterized by. This nostalgia is rooted in a menagerie of values which we imagine are open

and subject to collective shaping but which are in fact more tilted in favor of the operators of capital and rulemaking than of any government or populous. The illiberal aspects of the cosmopolitan champion the metropoles situated at the top of the pyramid and are structured to maintain their possession of colonies - literal, economic, and psychic. Those metropoles were Paris and London at one time; Brussels, Beijing, and Washington, DC today. The cosmopolitan, then, is not just the flâneur, Cubism, and bánh mì. It is also the miner, Coca-Cola being more accessible than water in parts of the world, and the young person assembling sports shoes at night outside of Putian.

In this intersection of capital and meaning-making, we begin to bump up against very Thomas Mann questions about the difference between civilization and culture. The terms are often used interchangeably but they are not the same. A bit dark in that typical middle European way, Mann's formulation is that civilization is globalist but not necessarily cosmopolitan. Fetishizing rationality, the Enlightenment, and technocratic governance, civilization flattens difference and is illiberal—concerned with intelligence rather than meaning. The cosmopolitan in this formulation is the comedy mask to globalism's tragedy. In this aspect, culture represents Mann's "sublimation of the demonic" and belongs to the other side of the human animal less discussed in polite company—the deeper, darker, psychic experience of living that takes social form in the arts, ritual, and value. This exhibition's main character, the cosmopolitan subject, interweaves culture, influence, and desire together, maybe parasitically but also creatively. The cosmopolitan's polyglot culture provides us systems of meaning-making. In their ideal form, these systems allow us to know and trust one another, and to agree to live side by side. At their worst they nurture appropriation, misreading, and inequity.

As we drag ourselves across the finish line of what late capitalism has brought in material bounty and wrought in social pain, we labor to juxtapose our old assumptions of power and influence against newer forms of social equities. This takes on vital importance as we consider what makes a group or an ingroup. In this changing of the human season, how do we now think about and hopefully grow from our complicated histories of interaction, dependency, and innovation? In this sorely needed public dialogue, we need more artistic and humanistic interventions to guide us through the reassessment of the social relations that this exhibition intersects with. It is through the recognition of what is shared and what is imposed that a healing can begin. Part of this work can be done via the rituals of art, through which we participate in the Aristotelian project of arousing and purging "dangerous emotions" to become more alive and develop more cohesive community. This is part of art's cathartic function—an excising of ghosts.

Objects and images move spatially, sometimes on the froth of capitalism, sometimes by gunpoint, providing a system of encounter that through accrual build webs of relation in a culture.

Some of the ideas spoken of here may intersect at oblique angles and perhaps only gently float upon the works in the exhibition while others penetrate directly. But regardless, sometimes the backward glance can be very clear. I do not imply that we can or should arrive at a shared interpretation or definition of the works of art presented here, but rather a shared reference point. To show one an image of triumph is to show another an image of loss and uninvited appropriation. We share much of the same conscious and unconscious cultural patrimony even if what we take from that material is unaligned. Yet we need the connective tissues that the arts supply in a complex culture. Art functions both as tool, something that is understood and self-aware, and as feeling, perhaps inarticulable but collectively shared.

I hold that art can touch us in ways that encapsulate the complexity of human experience, in all our creativity and warmth as well as our brutish nastiness. In fact, this is exactly what the purpose of the things we call art and cultural patrimony has historically been. Rather than show us good behavior or idealized citizenship, which is often the role of social realism and some of what is termed social practice, art can, at its best, look behind the mask that civilization fashions and into the rough and tumble elements of the human animal. This important task of the reconciliation of civilization and the spirit is an enduring need, perhaps even moreso in a political moment saturated with tribal urgencies and a power struggle between community and agency. Instrumentalized in this way, art can act as a place of liberated dialogue—a place to try on new configurations of meaning and power in a speculative fashion. The alienated distance art provides gives a place for both our better angels and our less admirable impulses to come into contact in a process of producing sensibilities that can be new, perverse, and alive.

The objects in this exhibition provide a great case study in thinking about how material culture speaks to and embodies our values. *The Metropol Drama* interrogates the externalized, performative aspects of social character via the things we make, in an attempt to see each other across time and culture, from the eras of the ancients to our present moment. Rather than relegating these physical embodiments to being viewed as byproducts of interaction, I posit that they are tools—used for centuries—to find communion and undertake rule-making with those both like and unlike oneself.

In this need for art to help balance the poles of esteem and accusal in a community, an important component is our "mitigating controls": the forms of culture built to negotiate differences and build safe, mutually valued experiences between dissimilar peoples. There are dangerous rocks lurking in civic space, as any wounding turn of phrase or painfully awkward interaction can attest. Partly in response, the human animal has spent lifetimes building a scaffolding of technocratic bureaucracy around us, but behind this there sits an aesthetic one as well, which builds the webs of psychic interactions needed to produce the "mutual" in mutual consent. In this sense, the aesthetic is a necessary part of a healthy society and a necessary part of a complex interior life. How we navigate these systems is often embodied in the values of the era. Today value is held in abstractions of wealth, the monetization of attention, symbols, and the precious resource of leisure. In the archaic before times, value was stored in the primal energies of metal and earth, reproduction, and the precious resource of leisure. *The Metropol Drama* embraces these storehouses of value, showing along with works of art things like contracts, currencies, and the most abstract of all: the bond. These examples of law and agreement, sometimes literally set in stone, are tools—sets of social guardrails fashioned to keep citizens free to express interests and ideas, however complex or contradictory, and to be consequently protected from violence.

In thinking through this project, I often thought about the dimensions of time and the scales at which we view our pasts. Fifteenth-century France, Mesopotamia, or another time and place can equally present a space for us to reflect on our own successes and failures of communal living in a way in which we can be a little more dispassionate. To use the composer Brian Wilson's formulation, "the nearest faraway place." We can talk about the brutality of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" in a way that does not impinge directly on modern questions of the punishment state, but it's there. We can think about law, poverty, and empire because Rome or Babylon, in a way, don't matter at all. It was all a very long time ago and today's legionnaires go by different names. This exercise can help us stand outside the boundaries of time and place while still processing the tensions of today's current urgencies. An increasingly difficult ask in any day and age. In my mind, the empires that made the metropole possible were obviously drunk on violence, savage and exploitive. But what is gained in that backwards glance is that these big, nasty imperial communities provide an origin story for today's fundamental question of how big a circle of affinity we should draw. Asking this question can complicate many of our ideas concerning cultural patrimony, aesthetic integration, and appropriation that float in this present moment.

As someone not expert in these ideas but interested in them, I make exhibitions to understand subjects, not explain them. The central question of *The Metropol Drama* is, how has the intermixing and sharing of material culture that cosmopolitanism has brought formed an undergirding of our psychic and emotional life, individually and collectively, throughout history and today? The diversity of objects we encounter in this space borders on the kaleidoscopic. In presenting so many different affects, tones, and times together in the room, we begin to see a whole from a composite. As if standing on a busy street corner, we can start to see a multivalent sense of place and self come together. Perhaps there are new relations that these objects can help us uncover regarding our own values and sense of self. It is only through recognizing the synthetic and fluid nature of our systems and values that we take the liberty to manipulate their plasticity and refashion them anew. Art has always told stories of who we are, and how we want to be seen. Through the intermixing of citizens and the material culture they create, more modern articulations of citizenship can be made.

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